

# THE RED HOUSE

We moved to the red house in the winter after my younger sister, May, died of meningitis. That year was also one of the wettest on record, my mother reminds me whenever we sit and think back to that time. In the weeks following our move from Clunes back to Fitzroy, our new house was almost submerged by a rising flood. Although there must have been days when it was not wet, my memory of that winter is of looking out into the backyard from the kitchen window at an unrelenting curtain of rain.

As a result of the weather the house soon resembled an old rickety wooden boat, set adrift in a murky grey swamp that had only weeks earlier resembled a dustbowl. Although the house creaked and swayed in the fierce winds of the storms that attacked it, we were luckily left relatively high and dry and secure inside the house itself. It was in better condition than anything my mother had expected to find in the city, with only a few rotting floorboards, no broken windows and, remarkably, a tin roof that stood the test of the weather and did not leak at all.

The owner of the red house was an Italian, Mr Carboni. Over the years that we lived in Fitzroy he was never seen out of a pair of overalls, except when he went to the bank on a Friday afternoon to deposit the rent money he had collected that week, and to mass on Sunday at All Saints, the church of the local Italian community.

Mr Carboni was a better landlord than most. He had done the place up a bit before we moved in, and remained willing to come over and do any work that was needed, although my mother did most of the small jobs around the house herself.

The house was the last in a line of similarly built single-fronted terraces. We lived on a corner on the hill that fell away to Smith Street, the main shopping strip. Consequently, a steady stream of foot traffic marched past our side gate, as people made their way to and from the shops each day.

Our new home was structurally no different from those around us, and would not have attracted any attention from passers-by, except that it did not wear the same coat of uniformly dull, colourless paint as did its neighbours. The facade of our house, including the verandah and a wooden

fence that leaned precariously into the street, were painted a rich congealed red, as were the sidewall and fence, and even the letterbox, crudely nailed to the side gate. The paintbrush had missed nothing.

The first time that I saw the red house I was standing out the front on the footpath with mum and dad, while Mr Carboni searched through his pockets for the front-door key, which he found only after emptying every pocket of nails, screws, a pouch of tobacco and bits of paper with reminder notes and figures written all over them.

As we stood staring at the front of the house, each of us was thinking the same thing, I'm sure: that the colour was more than a little overwhelming. No one painted houses that colour where we had just come from. And nobody around here either by the look of things.

After opening the front door for us, Mr Carboni walked back onto the footpath, pointed to the house and commented, almost to himself, 'Red.'

My father looked at the house with real embarrassment. He turned to Mr Carboni, seeking an explanation.

'Red? What's going on?' he quizzed with a screwed-up face.

'Yes, red, red,' Mr Carboni replied, as if to confirm the obvious. He looked back at my father while waving the family into the house with a welcoming hand, feeling no need to provide further explanation.

We inspected each room of the house and ended our tour in the backyard. A rusting, corrugated fence skirted the property. A sudden wind picked up a covering of dust and whipped it around the barren yard. My mother looked around and smiled. She did not seem disappointed that there was not so much as a single flower bud to be seen among the few blades of grass and weeds. Unlike my father, she was not bothered by the garish colour of the house either. As long as the inside was clean and tidy and not knocked about too much, she knew she could turn a shell into a home.

Mum entered into negotiations with Mr Carboni. She had argued against coming back to the city. She sensed the looming danger in my father moving back both to his old streets and his old habits. But on realising that she had no real say in the matter, she was determined to ensure that she at least have some say in the house she was moving into.

All that she asked of Mr Carboni was a 'new' second-hand stove to replace the burnt-out double gas-ring cook-top in the kitchen, and a 'cut

out' from the first week's rent so that she could buy material to make some curtains. Mr Carboni agreed immediately.

Turning to my father, she informed him as much as asked him, 'What do you think? We'll take it?'

My father brought out his battered wallet and handed over two weeks' rent and the same in key money, all of which he'd borrowed from his boss at the timber mill back at Clunes. And that same afternoon he caught a train back to Ballarat and then a bus out of town, so that he could arrange to have our furniture and belongings sent down the highway on the back of the wood truck used to deliver fuel around the town.

Although my father was suspicious of the colour of the house, he was happy to be back in the city, and back to his old stomping ground and the suburb that he had grown up in. His childhood home was just one street away from the house we moved into. It was only after he had met my mother and moved with her to my grandmother's house over in Carlton that he had left Fitzroy for the first time in his life.

The eventual move to the bush had come on the advice of a doctor at the public hospital. He said that the fresh air would help my dad recover from the asthma that he had suffered since taking his first job in a shoe factory, when he left school at thirteen. If it was a good idea at the time it did not last, as my father soon ended up in a timber mill filling his lungs with sawdust.

My grandmother told me years later that the move did not really have all that much to do with his asthma. It was the drink. My father had been a boxer and a top street-fighter around the time that he met my mum. He gave up the ring (but not the street) after I was born, a decision he soon regretted. When he wasn't at work, he was at the pub. And when he finally got home to my grandmother's house of a night, he was always drunk and was looking for an argument, or worse.

Mum should have known what was coming. When they had met she was just a girl, and he a boy, really, who charmed her off her feet and into bed, and then into the maternity ward at the Royal Women's, all in one movement. But he was the boy who was also already the violent young man, who on the day after their wedding had asked his six months' pregnant wife to 'fetch us a cup of tea, will you?' When she hesitated with 'in a minute, love, I've got to sit a minute, my back's killing me', he hit her

with a straight right on the end of her nose that sat her on the floor. 'I said now, not in a fucken minute.'

He fought with her so much that my mother eventually decided that she would have to move away from her mother's house, for both their sakes. Clunes was a drastic move. But it worked, for a time. He drank less, got back in shape due to the heavy work around the mill, and seemed content for the first time in many years. They appeared happy. And when May came along it seemed that their move was complete.

When May was born she was called a 'special baby'. She was magical even, some claimed, in a town where old superstitions held sway over logic. After her birth the women of the town, who had become friends with mum, came to the house each day just to stare at May.

My father's habit of explosive anger melted before May. He was truly besotted with her. They both were. Mum would sing songs that she had heard on the radio to May, while my father carried her in his arms from the moment he walked in the door after work until she went off to sleep. Those large hands of his that could so quickly be fashioned into fists of stone now lifted May gently into the air.

And then it all ended with the suddenness of her short illness and death. May was two days away from her second birthday.

My father wanted to bring May back to Melbourne for burial, but my mother stood up to him and demanded that she be buried in the town where she was born. On the day of her funeral the women of the town lined up and took it in turns to offer their sympathies. Mum mumbled polite replies when anyone commented 'it's very sad, very sad', although little of what was said that day appeared to register with her. My father did not come out into the lounge room at all. He stayed in May's room, sitting on her bed, and did not speak with anyone.

I can't remember much more about that day, with the exception of walking by May's room and stopping in the doorway as I watched my father crying into his big hands. He looked like he was no more than a kid himself.

In the weeks following the funeral he refused to speak to anybody. It was difficult for my mother to find anything safe to say to him, let alone confide in him about May, something that she was desperate to do.

She tried to talk about May with him several times, but he either responded with silence, or swore and yelled at her uncontrollably. He also found his way back to the pubs, and began to spend each night in the saloon bar of The Pioneer — just around the corner from our house — before staggering home drunk.

And then one night after he had walked in from the pub he sat down at the table and just said to her, ‘Fuck all this fresh-air bullshit, we’re going back to Melbourne.’ She tried persuading him to stay, talked about his job and my school, but he would not listen. He got sick of her talking and slammed a fist into his heavy palm.

‘We’re fucken going. That’s it. We’re going.’

And that *was* it.

She looked across the table that night and saw once again the man she had married six years earlier, the man who she had deceived herself had faded and eventually disappeared with the move away from the city.

Without our furniture we could not move into the red house immediately. While my father was back at Clunes organising the truck, my mother and I stayed at the old temperance hotel opposite Spencer Street railway station. We couldn’t afford even the cheapest accommodation for more than a couple of nights. The funeral had cost my parents every penny they had, and some more that was borrowed. And they had not even begun to pay it back.

The cheapest rooms at the hotel were about the size of a wardrobe and had only a narrow single bed in them, so my mother and I slept head to toe, ‘sardine style’, as my grandmother used to call it.

On the first night at the hotel I lay under a pair of heavy grey blankets watching the passing carlights skim across the ceiling while listening to the grunting engines of the trains straining away from the city and heading for the bush. I could also hear someone in the room next door coughing out their lungs into a pillow. Getting a good night’s sleep would have been difficult enough with all the distraction, but I had not been sleeping well anyway, not since May had gone. I missed her and thought about her most nights before I finally drifted off.

On the night that she died a nurse at the base hospital had held my hand while attempting to console my sobbing by telling me that May had left us so that she could 'walk across to the angels'. It sounded nice to hear that from the nurse, but I never really believed it. Even then, when I was so young, I did not believe in God. I knew that May was in the ground in the Clunes cemetery. That was as far as she had gone.

Mostly I did not fall asleep until the middle of the night, only to be woken exhausted, in the early-morning light, by May herself. She would press her face against mine, waking me as her warm breath touched my cheek. I would sit up in bed with a jolt and search the room for her, but she would be gone.

I did not mention a word about May's visits to either mum or dad. My father would not have listened to me anyway. He would not have her name spoken in the house. And I knew that if I told my mother about the visits she would only get upset and start crying. So I kept them to myself.

With my father away in Clunes for those two days that we were at the hotel, I was tempted to ask mum about so many of the things that had been on my mind since May's death. I looked up to the other end of the bed. She was sound asleep. So I rolled over and faced the wall while listening to the hiss of another diesel engine snaking its way through the goods yard opposite the hotel.

I soon got used to the colour of the house. After I began to make friends at my new school I found that it was easy to direct them to our house.

'It's the red-painted place on ...'

'Oh, the red house. I know the red house.'

Everyone knew the red house, and no one made much of a fuss about it except for my father, who never stopped complaining, either to himself or anybody else that would listen to him.

'Red?' he continued to ask after we had moved in. 'Red? Why the fuck would anyone paint a house red?'

He eventually spoke to Emu Bailey, a local junk man who rented a front room in a row of double-storey stone terraces up the road from us. Emu claimed to know the entire history and business of the street, so my father

asked him when it was that Mr Carboni had painted the house the colour it was.

‘Oh no, it weren’t him. Was done well before he took the place over, the Iye-tie fella. There was this woman lived there, a long time back, Ettie Rogers was her name. She did it. One Saturday morning, I still remember. I was just coming back from the street when I saw her out there painting the house, with a six-inch brush. Did the lot in half a day. Some sort of communist, was Ettie. So they say, anyway. Most everyone around here back then was DLP. Still is, some of them. Ettie wasn’t in agreement with the others in the street, so she let them know all about it. Redone it every summer too, the same colour, red. You must remember that time, from when you were a kid? She did it back then. You must remember that, Mick?’

My father shrugged his shoulders. He did not appear to remember anything at all from when he was a child. And if he did he kept it to himself.

As he spoke to my father, Emu cast a disapproving eye over the house. ‘Looks like it could do with a spruce up, I reckon.’

Although my father appeared to be settling back easily into the suburb itself, linking up with his old mates and his drinking haunts, he became increasingly unhappy with the house colour, and would not let up with his complaints. He occasionally threatened to repaint the house, but he had no real pretensions to home repairs.

He had landed on his feet back in Fitzroy, getting a good job laying tar on a local council road crew. He worked long, hard hours, and spent his remaining time (and money) at the pub, so taking up a paintbrush was never a threat carried into action.

My mother was different. She began to put all her energy into the house. She went around to local op-shops looking for materials. She sewed curtains for each of the windows and spread her two tea-chests full of photographs and ornaments throughout the house.

On the day that we had left the house at Clunes for the last time, she had carried a framed portrait of May with her on the train. In order to protect it from damage she wrapped it in a tea-towel and then a pillowslip. Then she clutched it to her chest all the way down to Melbourne. I know that she kept the frame under the bed in the two nights that we stayed in the hotel but it

was nowhere to be seen in the house now, and I could not bring myself to ask her where it was.

My mother also became an insatiable scavenger. If someone left an unwanted chair in the street, she'd give it a quick examination, decide whether it could be covered or painted, before carrying it home if it passed her inspection. It wasn't long before the inside of the house came to life and began to resemble the old place at Clunes.

Her resourcefulness also led to the growth of an unusual collection in our hallway. It started with just the one roll of lino held together by a length of twine that I noticed leaning against the wall when I arrived home from school one afternoon.

I pointed to it. 'What's that, mum?'

'What's what?'

'That?' I again pointed to the roll.

'Nothing. That's nothing. Don't worry about that, it's just an idea.'

When my father came home from work that night and the roll of lino fell across his path as he tried to get into the kitchen, he asked the same question as I had and received a similarly evasive reply.

Over the next weeks additional rolls of lino appeared at the house, gathering in the hallway alongside the initial arrival. I dared not ask mum about them, and she offered no explanation. So we left them to accumulate. Although the rolls of lino eventually blocked any clear pathway to the kitchen, opposition to her hoardings would have been pointless.

At the same time that she hoarded second-hand rolls of lino my mother also sat at the kitchen table of a night poring over a paint colour chart. She had decided that the outside of the house would have to be repainted if she was going to placate my father. The weatherboards had faded and some of the paint had peeled away after years of baking in the sun and getting lashed by rain. So it would have to be redone soon anyway. Although the chart claimed to contain '121 vibrant colours', she struggled to find anything that attracted her eye.

'What colour, then?' she suddenly demanded of my father one night as he sat eating his tea.

He looked down at the chart and made his choice without informed consideration. He pointed his knife at one of the coloured squares.

'Brown.'



‘Brown? Brown?’ She was disappointed. ‘Not brown. Jesus. Something a little brighter, maybe?’

He stabbed a fork into the end of a lamb chop. He lifted the fork and examined the piece of meat. ‘I don’t care then. Any colour but that fucken red. The blokes at the pub think it’s a joke. A fucken joke. Just paint it.’

I had a small bedroom off the hallway, behind my parents’ room. It overlooked the side yard. Each morning, when I woke, I would pull the curtain across and survey the back swamp before staggering out through the kitchen and into the cold for a pee. Although the rain had finally stopped, the water in the yard was yet to subside. It was a dull green in colour now and smelled like a wet dog. My mother had found some lengths of timber paling in the street and used them to lay a pathway to the toilet. But most of them had either become submerged or had floated away.

I had the house to myself on Saturday mornings. I would lie in bed with the curtain open, a book in my lap, while my mother was down the street with her shopping trolley and my father was doing a half-shift on the road. I had brought a box of second-hand books with me from Clunes, favourites that I had collected whenever I went into Ballarat with my mother. I had unpacked the box, and lined the books along the windowsill.

It was not until I went looking for my illustrated *Tom Sawyer* one Saturday morning that I realised that I’d misplaced it or, perhaps worse, had not brought it to Melbourne with me. It was not on the window shelf, or in the empty box that now sat in the corner of the room.

I went searching for the book throughout the house, starting in the kitchen, and then the outside laundry, before ending up in mum and dad’s bedroom. I looked in every drawer of the old dresser and through the wardrobe. I could not find the book anywhere. Mum had unpacked everything from the tea-chests and thrown them out as they had fallen apart under the strain of the move. But she had kept one smaller wooden box with odd stuff in it. I had seen it around the house somewhere, but I could not remember where. I began the search again.

Eventually I found the box in the kitchen. Mum had covered it with a floral-patterned piece of material and sat a vase on top of it. I took the vase from the top of the box and placed it on the kitchen table. I neatly folded the

floral cover and took the lid off the box. A familiar scent escaped from it and lifted into the air. I knew what the box contained without having to look.

I sat for a while, staring down into the box, unsure of what to touch first and of whether I should disturb its contents at all. Eventually I put my hand in and picked up her first pair of booties. They were made from soft cream-coloured wool and had pink satin ribbon threaded through them. And they still smelt of Velvet soap. The box also contained a rattle that had a small mirror inside it. May used to hold it against her face in an attempt to catch her reflection. I picked up a small, smoothly varnished jarrah ball that dad had shaped for her on the lathe at the timber mill. It was the only thing he had ever made. And in the bottom of the box, the pillowcase that mum had held to her heart when she left Clunes.

I heard mum at the door, struggling with the shopping trolley. I sat at the table, gripping the wooden ball in my hand. She came down the hallway, steering the trolley with one hand while carrying a bag of groceries in the other. I had put the photograph of May on top of the box. She did not see it at first. She began to quietly unpack the trolley. She had her back to the framed picture as she put the bag of groceries on the table and removed a box of flour and some tinned fruit from the trolley.

‘How’s your morning been?’ she asked with her back to me.

As she turned towards me she noticed the photograph. She froze for a moment before taking a step forward and bending over. She looked into May’s eyes. May looked back at her from behind the glass. She was wearing a cream knitted suit and the same booties that I had just retrieved from the box. Her dark curls were sitting on her shoulders.

Mum leaned closer until she was almost touching the glass with the end of her nose. She began whispering to herself, ‘May, May.’ Realising my mistake I jumped up from the table and reached over to remove the photograph. My mother’s hand grabbed hold of the frame before I could reach it. She held it towards her and pressed her face against the glass.

I didn’t know what to do next. The two of us stood watching each other. She occasionally glanced back towards the front door, knowing that he would be home soon, and he would not want to see the photograph sitting

on the kitchen table. She leaned across the table and took the jarrah ball from my hand. She kneaded the grain of the wood between a thumb and forefinger before placing it next to the photograph.

She took my hand. 'We can't leave this out, Michael, not yet. Not her picture, none of this stuff. He's not ready yet.'

She was right, of course, although I know now that she also understood that he would never be ready to confront the memory of May again.

We sat at the table with May until we heard him at the side gate. She hurriedly packed everything away before he had removed his work boots at the back door. When we got up from the table and moved into the other rooms of the red house, mum and I carried that image of May with us.

As the winter left for the year, the yard began to dry slowly. But it looked even drearier now, with nothing growing in the garden. Mum persuaded Mr Carboni to put some drainage in, hoping that the flood would not return next winter.

Later, in the spring, on what would have been May's third birthday, my mother provided both my father and myself with a series of surprises. When he got home from work she asked him to follow her into the yard.

'Come out back. I've got something for you to see, both of you. You too, Michael, come on, into the yard.'

She opened the door and stood back so that she could follow us into the yard. I was struck by the beauty of what she had created. The previously barren square of dirt was now covered in a patchwork quilt of lino pieces, dressing the yard in brightly checked patterns and wild swirls of colour.

If my father was impressed he did not offer a comment. So she demanded one. 'What do you think? What do you reckon, Mick? It's an improvement on the mud, isn't it?'

He put his hands on his hips and surveyed the yard. 'Well, I suppose it'll go with the colour of the house. Yeah, it's just as bad as that. Won't be for long though. I'm going to paint it. Paint it fucken brown.'

With that he turned away from her and walked towards the kitchen. What she said next stopped him dead.

'I'm pregnant, Mick. I'm having a baby.'

He spun around and moved towards her. I thought that maybe he was going to hit her. But he didn't. He stopped in front of her. They were toe to toe.

‘You what?’

‘Pregnant. I’m having a baby, Mick.’ She looked over at me. ‘Michael, you’re going to be a brother.’

He looked across at me. ‘No, he’s not. What are you going to do? What are we going to fucken do?’

She moved in to him, as close as she could get and stared into his face. ‘I’m going to have a baby, Mick, a baby. It’s too late, Mick.’

He looked at me again and then back at her, looking suddenly weakened, as if imploring her to help him. But she would not help him. She did not say another word. He turned around and marched into the house and then out through the front door, slamming it behind him. She watched the empty doorway for a moment before walking over to me and ruffling a handful of my hair.

‘Hey, Michael, I’ve got another surprise for you.’

With that she went into the laundry and came out with a tin of paint and an old brass spoon. ‘It’s for the front of the house. I’ve decided to redo it.’

I looked down at the can. ‘What colour is it?’

‘I’ll show you.’

She shook the can vigorously, put it on the ground and placed the handle of the spoon under the lid. I talked to her as I watched her attempts to lever the top from the can.

‘You really going to have another baby, mum?’

‘Yep, I am.’

‘A boy or a girl?’

‘I don’t know, love. I don’t know.’

She chopped at the handle of the spoon. The paint lid flipped into the air. We watched as it spun like a brightly coloured tossed coin. The metallic top of the lid caught the light of the sun as it turned over and over and over, while the underside of the lid spread a splash of colour against the clear blue sky.

It was a deep red splash of colour.